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## from **The SRB at the Festival – Part 2** [2016]

by Nick Major

Monday 15<sup>th</sup> August. Late afternoon. The Book Festival had settled into its routine. Readers were enjoying a pint of heavy in the sun. Sugar-starved children surrounded the ice-cream stand. Panicked late-comers ran across the grassy Square, Festival programmes flapping at their sides. The heat was pulsing in the entrance to the Studio Theatre. Inside, the audience were wiping sweat from their brows and clutching bags to their chests. There was no room to wriggle, and, anyway, not enough oxygen to allow for such physical exertion. But the sticky heat was soon forgotten when acclaimed Highland historian James Hunter and Canadian academic and journalist Myrna Kostash arrived on stage.

The audience were transported back to the early nineteenth century and given a peek into two locations on the same latitude – 58 degrees north – that have a shared history, even if they are 3,500 miles apart. Hunter was promoting his new history of the Sutherland Clearances, *Set Adrift Upon the World*. Many of the families evicted from their homes in north-east Scotland were sent to what is now Winnipeg, Canada. Myrna Kostash includes this vast expanse of land and people in her ‘patchwork quilt’ of a book, *The Seven Oaks Reader*, which ‘weaves together interviews, declarations, memoir and poetry to tell the story of the competition between the North West Company and the Hudson’s Bay Company for the lucrative fur trade’. Many of the usurped Scots Hunter writes about were embroiled in this trade war which culminated in the short, bloody Battle of Seven Oaks.

At the beginning of his reading Hunter raised the question: why write another book about the clearances? His answer was simple: to reach beyond ‘the generalities’ and ‘get to the stories of the people on the ground’. His inspiration was E.P. Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class*. When this classic appeared in the 1950s Hunter was a history student. Thompson tells the ‘story of the ordinary folk, the miners, the factory workers, the hand loom weavers.’ He wanted to rescue these people from what he calls the ‘“enormous condescension of posterity”’. Hunter writes in the introduction to his book that ‘historians often inclined to deal mainly with the powerful should also listen out to the voices of humanity at large’.

Hunter believes historians should get a sense of where history happens. Once in a while they should leave the dusty archives and step out into the landscapes of the past. He quoted Simon Schama’s teacher, who once told the popular historian, ‘you must pay attention to the archive of the feet.’ Hunter ‘spent some time walking the straths of Sutherland in to what, ironically, is now called wild land...but I was also keen to go to places like Churchill [Manitoba]...the polar bear capital of the world.’ Myrna Kostash also emphasised that the land the Scottish settlers worked on was no empty canvas upon which to paint a new life. It belonged the Métis people, an indigenous Indian-French race who fought on the side of the North West Company. A sadness descended on the room as the event drew to a close. There was an acknowledgement that to read these two books would be to read of how the dispossessed of Scotland were pitched against the dispossessed of a new found land.

Next time Hunter and Kostash are invited to the Book Festival, perhaps they should be given a larger space.